

Unique city laundry awash in old-time Chinese tradition

By Matthew P. Romanski

When the native Chinese first came to this country to toil in small laundries, any customer who dared to pick up his wash without a claim ticket would be in trouble.

Such is not entirely the case at Eng's Laundry, the only establishment of its kind in the Reading area at 142 S. Fifth St.

The proprietor there is Dorothy LaSota, a pleasant woman of Polish descent who has been running the shop ever since she purchased it from a Chinese family 16 years ago.

The mother of four grown children has come to know most of her customers so well that she rarely needs to see a claim check.

"AT ONE TIME the old Chinese laundries wrote the customer's name or initials inside the neck of the shirt with indelible ink," said Mrs. LaSota. However, she issues a claim check printed in English and Chinese which are printed by a firm in New York City's Chinatown.

The laundry shop is adjacent to the Oriental Gift House on South Fifth Street, but the actual work is done in a rear building located several doors away and also is owned by the LaSotas.

Mrs. LaSota and her husband, Walter, purchased the business in 1966 from close friends, Joe and May Eng.

"WE LIVED in the same neighbor-

hood and our children went to the same swimming pool and schools," said Mrs. LaSota. "One day Joe asked me if I'd be interested in running the place.

"I told him I always wanted a gift shop because I was tired of working in business offices. He said we couldn't buy the gift shop without the laundry. Besides, he said, the laundry would be something to fall back on when things were slow in the gift shop. That convinced me and I haven't been sorry since," Mrs. LaSota said.

The Engs left Reading to open a store called the Children of Eng in the King of Prussia Shopping Center.

It was Eng's late father, Harry Eng, who opened the laundry long before World War II. Originally located at Sixth and Cherry streets, the laundry was later moved to its present location and a gift shop was added.

One of the LaSota's five employees started work at the laundry as a young girl back in 1943 after moving to Reading from Georgia.

She is 56-year-old Girline Carwell, 335 Pear St., who remembers when the laundry's pressing irons were heated over a coal stove. Electric irons came later, she said.

"EVERYTHING else was old-fashioned, too," she remarked. The old wooden tubs have been replaced with machinery which injects soap and starch automatically and keeps track of the various cycles.

People who are fussy about their

shirts and other things such as pajamas, aprons, smocks, sheets, pillowcases and the like, bring them to Eng's because the articles are hand-finished, Mrs. LaSota said. Some restaurants even bring in their tablecloths and napkins.

In pre-inflation days, the average cost of laundering a shirt was 35 cents. Today it is 80 cents. A shirt with ruffles — the kind worn to a formal affair — brings much more, depending on the time required to press the fancy sleeves and shirt fronts, said Mrs. LaSota.

At one time, many clergymen had their collars washed and starched at the laundry. Today, however, throw-away collars are popular, she noted.

THE LAUNDRY does a brisk business from nurses who get their caps cleaned and pressed.

"Because the caps come in different shapes, they require a lot of hand finishing," said Mrs. LaSota. "We use a certain kind of starch on these caps. When our present supply of this special starch is gone, I doubt whether we'll be able to get anymore."

She explained that the caps are first washed in water and then placed in starch which has been cooked. The excess starch is rubbed off the cap which is left to dry. Next, it is sprinkled and hand ironed. If any streaks of starch remain, the cap must be placed through the whole process a second time.

Doctors also patronize the laundry to have gown and lab coats cleaned un-

der the higher sanitary conditions.

THE ENTIRE FAMILY is actively involved in helping Mrs. LaSota with the work.

Her husband, a retired foreman of the American District Telephone Co.'s fire and burglar alarm division, assists with the office work.

Son Walter keeps the laundry equipment in good working order in off-duty hours as an electrical engineer with Metropolitan Edison Co.

Two other sons, Edward, a design draftsman with Gilbert/Commonwealth, and Raymond, a computer

programmer with Kiwi Shoe Polish Co., Douglassville, help with pick-ups and deliveries.

A daughter, Cynthia, teaches the learning disabled with the Reading School District and also helps her mother trim windows at the gift shop.

All are involved in the folding and packaging of shirts and other garments.

"OUR SHIRTS are folded so that the fold is not in the middle but at the bottom," explained Mrs. LaSota. "For this reason the packages are longer than the conventional type of boxes in which shirts are usually placed."

Mrs. LaSota said the same kind of brown paper used to wrap shirts in the old days of Chinese laundries is still used by Eng's. Also, the packages are still tied with white string.

Mrs. LaSota is also kept busy with the buying for the gift shop. Most of the stock comes from West Coast importers. However, she does make buying trips to Chinatown in New York and San Francisco.

The LaSotas are busy in community affairs. Mrs. LaSota is a member of the Reading Board of Historical and Architectural Review, while her husband is active in the Callowhill Citizens' Association.

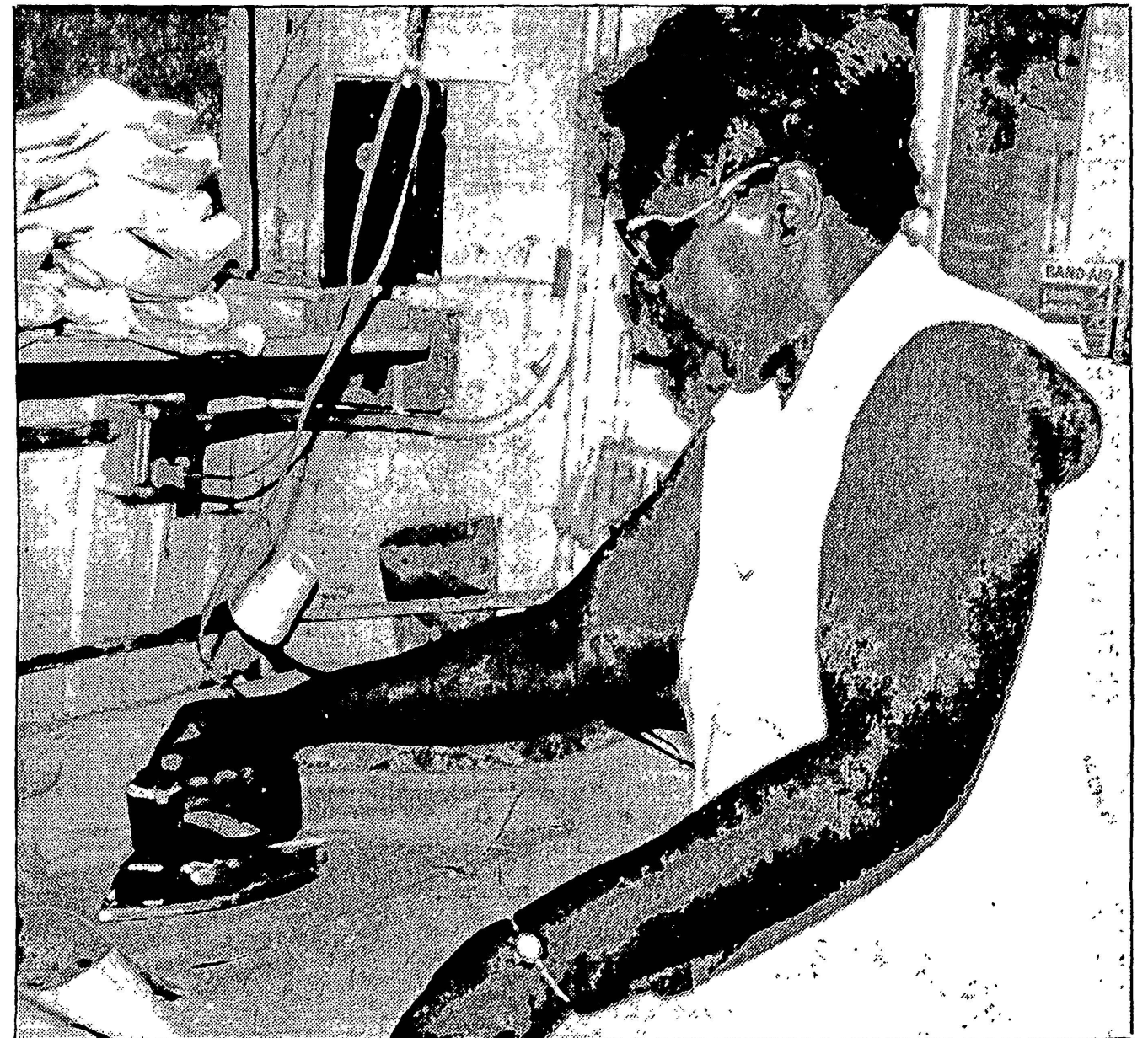


Photo by Matthew P. Romanski

Girline Carwell, 56, of 335 Pear St., repeats a process she has been doing since 1943 when she first began ironing shirts for Eng's Laundry.

The market report

NEW YORK (AP) — The stock market gained ground today on the strength of some early buying inspired by declining interest rates.

The Dow Jones average of 30 industrials, up more than 6 points in early trading, showed a 2.95 gain at 811.55 by noontime.

Gainers held a 2-1 lead over losers among New York Stock Exchange-listed issues.

After Friday's close the Federal Reserve announced the second half-point cut in the discount rate in less than two weeks, to 11 percent.

The reduction in the Fed's charge on loans to commercial banks and other financial institutions was seen as confirmation of recent evidence that it was relaxing its credit

Produce market

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — (USDA) — Trading today was active and supplies were fairly heavy on the Philadelphia produce market. Peaches were higher in price, while lettuce and tomatoes were lower. Most other commodities grown nearby were about steady in price.

Here is the preliminary report:

Beans— N.J. bushel crates best mostly 8.00-9.00

Cabbage— 1-¼ bushel cartons round green: N.J. mostly 4.50-5.00

Carrots— Calif. sacks: 48-lb. film bags 7.50-8.50 and 50-lb. sacks large loose mostly 7.50-8.00

Celery— N.Y. crates 2-½ doz. 7.50-8.50

Corn-sweet— N.J. crate approx. 5 doz.: yellow 4.00-5.00 and white mostly 4.00-5.00

Cucumbers— 1-9 bushel N.J. medium unwaxed 11.00-12.00

Potatoes— Idaho russets 50-lb. cartons 80-90s 15.00-15.50; 50-lb. sacks round white N.J. 3.00-3.75

Squash— N.J. ½-bushel carton zucchini small-medium mostly 4.00-5.00 and yellow straightneck small-medium mostly 3.50-4.50

Sweet Potatoes— 50-lb. cartons North Carolina 11.00-12.00

Tomatoes— N.J. 30-lb. cartons: best large mostly 5.00-6.00 and few best 7.00-8.00, medium mostly 3.50-4.00

Philadelphia eggs

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — (USDA) — Demand was fair on the Philadelphia eggs market today.

Prices to retailer: Sales to volume buyers, consumer grade white eggs in carton, delivered store cost:

Aetna sets office plans

Aetna Life Insurance and Annuity Co. announced today that it plans to consolidate its personal lines operation with the company's Philadelphia offices within a year from now.

Allison Reese, general manager of the Reading Branch office, said that the processing of automobile, individual life and homeowners policies will be shifted from 2001 Bern Road, Wyomissing, to the Philadelphia office.

He emphasized, however, that the Reading offices will continue to maintain sales and claims.

"As a matter of fact, our intent in this whole move is to